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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002423

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: IRI NATIONAL VOTER SURVEY: ECONOMY SLOWS
SAKASHVILI

REF: A. TBILISI 541

[1](#)B. TBILISI 2415

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Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: President Saakashvili's, and his government's, popularity have slipped since February (ref A). According to a USAID-funded poll conducted in early September by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Gallup Organization, the highest percentage of respondents in 3 years believe the country is going in the wrong direction. The ruling National Movement (UNM) remains the most trusted of parties, but by a narrower margin. The UNM's slide is primarily due to economic concerns, as unemployment has surpassed territorial integrity as Georgians' most pressing issue. Former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili was considered a strong Presidential candidate in opposition to Saakashvili. 60 percent of respondents said it would likely be good for Georgia if Okruashvili runs for President. In a proposed first round election, Saakashvili received less than half of the vote. It is a statistical dead heat in a runoff match-up between the two. Infrastructure development -- constant electricity, paved roads, and city appearances -- remain the top GOG achievements. Unemployment, the conflict zones and bad relations with Russia are considered the GOG's biggest failures. Confidence in the institutions of central government also decreased. End summary.

Saakashvili and UNM Dip

[1](#)2. (SBU) In the September 2007 poll, 58 percent of respondents -- the highest level in 3 years -- believe the country is going in the wrong direction. The ruling National Movement (UNM) remains the most trusted of parties, although this trust has dropped from 38 to 27 percent of respondents. If the Parliamentary elections were held now, 45 percent of voters said they would vote for the UNM, down from 56 percent in February. If a presidential contest were held tomorrow, 33 percent of respondents said they would support Saakashvili, down from 47 percent. 21 percent said they would support Okruashvili, while the rest favored other candidates or were undecided. Asked which candidate they would never vote for, 25 percent named Saakashvili, up from 12 percent earlier this year.

It's the Economy

13. (U) The UNM's slide is primarily due to economic concerns, as unemployment has surpassed territorial integrity as Georgians' most pressing fear. Creating jobs was almost dead even with restoring Georgia's territorial integrity as to what should be the GOG's first priority. The economy once again was a clear winner in the category of which field the GOG should reform first. Unemployment was considered the biggest failure of the current government, with 31 percent of respondents claiming they are unemployed.

Okruashvili Rises above the Opposition

14. (U) Former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili made a strong showing as a Presidential candidate against Saakashvili in the poll. 60 percent of respondents said it would probably or definitely be good for Georgia if Okruashvili runs for President. If a first round contest were held tomorrow, 33 percent said that they would vote for Saakashvili and 21 percent opted for Okruashvili. However, in a runoff match-up between the two, Saakashvili received 39 percent to Okruashvili's 38.

15. (U) 83 percent of Georgians believe it is important for the country to have an opposition, while only 5 percent do not. The level of support for the individual opposition parties was largely consistent with February results. No other potential opposition candidate for President received more than 8 percent of the vote in the survey.

Successes and Failures

16. (U) Infrastructure development -- constant electricity, paved roads, and city appearances -- remain the top GOG

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achievements, throughout Tbilisi and the country. Unemployment, the conflict zones and bad relations with Russia are considered the GOG's biggest failures. 70 percent of the respondents saw Russia as a threat to Georgia. In Tbilisi, violation of private property is also seen as a significant failure by the mayor. Confidence in the Church, Army, media, police, and Central Bank remained strong, consistent with the year's previous results. However, confidence in the President's office, Cabinet of Ministers, and Parliament all saw double-digit decreases. Satisfaction with regional governors' effectiveness decreased, while confidence in local government moved up two points to 37 percent.

17. (C) Comment: Support for both Saakashvili and his party has noticeably decreased in this latest IRI poll. Still the President and UNM remain the strongest game in town, despite the noticeable drag from economic issues and unemployment. The UNM continues to enjoy widespread support due to the undeniable visible progress they have made on infrastructure and daily security. Now that the low-hanging fruit is largely picked, it appears that the ruling party now faces the more difficult tasks of economic development, job creation, and instilling longer-term confidence in government. The poll, taken just before Okruashvili's dramatic attacks on Saakashvili put him openly in opposition (ref B), suggests that Okruashvili would be a strong challenger to Saakashvili, adding pressure to Saakashvili and the UNM. Still, Okruashvili is not yet an announced candidate, and it is not clear whether the election will be before or after his 35th birthday on November 6, 2007. If it is before, he be ineligible to run. End comment.

TEFFT